

## BOX 2.1 KING TUT

The discovery of the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun, more popularly known as King Tut, is one of the most significant discoveries in the history of archaeology, not so much for leading to a more complete understanding of ancient Egypt (which is important in itself), but more for catapulting archaeology into the realm of popular culture, especially in regard to mummies and curses.

King Tut was discovered by archaeologist Howard Carter in Egypt in 1922, and since that time has rarely faded from interest. A relatively minor ruler in the overall history of ancient Egypt, in his death, King Tut has likely become one of the most popular people who has ever lived. He is firmly embedded in popular culture – in movies, television, songs, cartoons, comic books, novels, bobble-head dolls, and traveling museum exhibits. In one recent year there were at least three traveling museum exhibits of King Tut in the United States alone; and one of the exhibits reportedly brought in more than \$100 million in admissions.

Many are aware of the Curse of the King Tut, which is attributed to the opening of the tomb. The sponsor of the archaeological work on the tomb was Lord Carnarvon, who died less than a year after the tomb's opening (probably due to an infection from a mosquito bite, rather than a curse). The death of Carnarvon and subsequently many others associated with the tomb's contents in more recent years have often been used in support of the curse. In reality, however,

support for the curse is nonexistent. Some have suggested that perhaps there were some kind of bacteria or other microorganisms sealed in the tomb that were deleterious to those who breathed them upon opening the tomb. Such explanations are not necessary. Of the 25 people associated most closely with the tomb and mummy, it is reported that the average age at death was 70. Howard Carter himself lived for another 17 years after discovering the tomb, dying at the age of 67.

There appears to be an endless stream of news reports on King Tut, of both the scientific and pseudoscientific kinds. There is no consensus on many aspects of his being, but some recent reports suggest that while alive, he was probably sickly, and may have walked with a limp, had a club foot, cleft palate, and an overbite. Some suggest he may have had a hormonal disorder, scoliosis, and malaria. Various studies in recent years have attributed his death to murder by either poison or a blow to the head, sickle cell anemia, or a combination of an infection, broken leg, and malaria. One recent research project indicates he was the product of an incestuous relationship. Another suggests he may have spontaneously combusted in his coffin. Considerable attention has been paid to the fact that his penis is apparently missing. Some suggest he may have had a genetic disorder leading to underdeveloped genitals while others claim it fell off accidentally or was deliberately removed in recent times.